

Oyster Gatherers of Cancale

by John Singer Sargent

Print Facts

- Medium: Oil on canvas
- Date: 1878
- Size: 31 1/8 " X 48 1/2"
- Location: Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.
- Style: Impressionism, Realism
- Genre: Rural scene or landscape
- Pronounced: (CUHN-cal-ee)
- When Sargent displayed this painting he was an unknown, 22 year old, American artist.
- Cancale is in the top part of France and has been known for its beaches and views and as a great place to catch seafood, especially oysters, for centuries.
- "When Sargent visited there in 1877, many of the men were away -- as they would often be through the nineteenth century -- sailing far into the ocean bound for the rich fisheries of Newfoundland, gambling big on a catch that might pay handsomely. Fathers, sons, brothers, sometimes many of the eligible men in a household might be gone for as long as six months from spring till fall. In their absence, and left to their own resources, the women and children could not live on promises of a Newfoundland catch alone. What they did have, however, were conditions along a coastline that were so unusual, that as far back as the Romans, the area had been harvested for oysters." (from <http://www.jssgallery.org/paintings/10076.html> - go there for more information on the painting.)

Artist Facts

- Pronounced: (SAHR-junt)
- Born January 12th, 1856 in Florence, Italy
- Died April 14th 1925 in London
- Sargent was born to American parents living abroad so he is considered an American painter. He lived most of his life abroad.
- Sargent's father was an eye surgeon.
- He had six siblings but only one sibling lived past childhood.
- Sargent was considered the leading portrait painter of his generation.
- Sargent never married.
- Besides English, Sargent was fluent in French, Italian and German.
- Sargent earned about \$130,000 current dollars per portrait that he painted.
- Sargent painted in oil and watercolor.
- Sargent was known for painting figures with little to no outlining or drawing-he drew them with just brush strokes.

Key Principle of Design to Teach

- **Contrast:** Often artists will juxtapose elements within an artwork to create tension or set a part of the work off from another for emphasis. This can be done by using opposing elements in close proximity (such as light and dark or large and small). The viewer's eye is naturally drawn to the area of contrast.

Possible Questions and Suggestions to Teach Contrast

- Cover the oyster gatherers. Is this a light or dark painting? Uncover the gatherers. Is this a light or dark painting?
- Sargent used both dark and light values in this painting to create contrast. The people are mostly all in dark clothing, which contrasts with the light background and causes the people to stand out. Contrast adds visual interest to a work of art.
- Take in examples of something like a book that has the title in a contrasting color from the background artwork so that the title stands out. A bad example of something with a value problem is also helpful to show the students and help them understand why it is important for the title to stand out. This can apply to projects they work on in school like their poster for the science fair or a board book.
- Remember that any opposing elements cause contrast if they are in close proximity to one another. Big and small (size) or dark and light (value) or rough and smooth (texture) or red and green (complementary colors)...

Keywords

- Contrast, color, space, emphasis, light

Other Possible Questions

- What are these people doing on the beach? (Gathering oysters) What clues does the artist give? (Baskets, children rolling up pants, subjects looking toward the ocean.)
- Do you see any men in this painting? Where could they be? Tell above story. Bring an oyster shell to show. (A picture of an oyster shell is in the packet.)
- How old are the women in this painting? (Three generations are represented.)
- The people in this village typically wore white headscarves and wooden shoes. Can you see that depicted in the painting? (The woman in the center appears to be wearing a nun's habit.)
- What is at their feet? How can you tell it is water? What can you see reflected in the water?
- Notice the bit of red on the center woman's skirt? Why do you think the artist does this? (to draw attention to the center of the painting)
- What do you notice in the background of this painting? Is this a busy beach?